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SUBJECT: SOLIDIFYING NEPAL'S SUPPORT FOR BHUTANESE REFUGEE
RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

REF: KATHMANDU 809

Summary

1. (SBU) During their visit to Nepal April 23 - 28, Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) Deputy Director for Asia and the Near East Larry Bartlett and PRM Deputy Director for Admissions Jan Belz met with key Government of Nepal (GON) officials to solidify GON support for the Bhutanese refugee resettlement program. UNHCR Country Representative Abraham Abraham agreed to launch an information campaign on third-country resettlement in the refugee camps and to provide the U.S. with 5,000 referrals (roughly 750 cases) by mid-July. Refugee community leaders expressed support for the U.S. resettlement program while randomly-selected focus group discussions with refugees in the camps revealed a high level of interest in the program. Bartlett and Belz briefed Core Group Ambassadors on U.S. resettlement plans, which they said might encourage their own capitals to move quickly on similar resettlement offers. A U.S. fact sheet on resettlement was released to the media at a press briefing April 26 and is now posted on the U.S. Embassy website.

Nepal To Pursue Resettlement, Repatriation Simultaneously

2. (SBU) In a meeting April 23 with Acting Foreign Secretary Gyan Chandra Acharya, PRM Deputy Director for Asia and the Near East Larry Bartlett expressed appreciation for the Government of Nepal's (GON's) agreement to proceed with third-country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees. The U.S. would continue to urge the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) to repatriate eligible refugees, he added. Acharya welcomed the U.S. resettlement offer, but noted that repatriation would be necessary since resettlement would not offer a solution for all refugees. Bartlett assured him that the U.S. was committed to consider for resettlement all interested refugees no matter if that number exceeded 60,000. On April 26, Foreign Ministry Joint Secretary for UN Affairs

Dinesh Bhattarai emphasized GON interest in holding the RGOB accountable for evicting its citizens and ensuring that at least a small number could repatriate to Bhutan. Bhattarai also indicated GON willingness to cooperate fully with U.S. resettlement plans. Both Acharya and Bhattarai suggested the GON would seek a bilateral meeting with the RGOB as soon as possible, perhaps within the next three months.

The U.S. Resettlement Program in a Nutshell

13. (SBU) On April 26, Bartlett and PRM Deputy Director for Admissions Jan Belz briefed GON officials from the Foreign and Home Ministries and the Director General of Immigration on U.S. resettlement plans. The Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration would select an implementing partner for the Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) in mid-May; the OPE would open an office in Kathmandu by mid-July, at which time it would take responsibility for processing the urban refugee caseload. In early September, the OPE would open a sub-office near the refugee camps in Jhapa District in southeastern Nepal to begin pre-screening refugees. Following pre-screening, U.S. immigration officials would visit Nepal to interview every family. After approval, every refugee would undergo medical screening before admittance to the U.S. Belz anticipated that the first group of refugees could board a plane for the U.S. in January/February 2008. In FY2008, the U.S. hoped to receive 7,000 Bhutanese refugees and as many as 15,000 in subsequent years, she added. The program could last for six or seven years depending upon the refugees' level of interest. None of the GON officials objected to this schedule.

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U.S. Fact Sheet and GON Exit Permit Procedures

14. (SBU) In both Foreign Ministry meetings, Bartlett requested that the GON approve public dissemination of the U.S. resettlement program fact sheet. Acting Foreign Secretary Acharya noted the political sensitivity of

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discussing local integration of the refugees and asked Bartlett to delete mention of this option. Acharya also emphasized the need to affirm that repatriation remained a desirable solution for the refugees. Bartlett agreed on both counts. In the later meeting, Joint Secretary Bhattarai agreed that the fact sheet could be publicly disseminated at the press briefing that same day. Noting the long delays in processing vulnerable Bhutanese refugees for exit permits, RefCoord requested the GON officials to consider exempting the Bhutanese refugees from the Nepali regulation that required a travel document before issuance of exit permits. She noted that the GON had made this exemption for Tibetans transiting Nepal. The GON attendees agreed that the current process needed to be streamlined and planned to review their exit permit procedures in coming weeks.

UNHCR Gears Up For Large-Scale Resettlement

15. (SBU) Bartlett and Belz met April 23 with UNHCR Country Representative Abraham Abraham and UNHCR Durable Solutions Officer Kim Roberson and, April 27, with visiting UNHCR Deputy Director for International Protection Vincent Cochetel. Both Abraham and Cochetel agreed that UNHCR would provide the first tranche of 5,000 referrals (roughly 750 cases) in early July. He suggested that UNHCR might draw the first batch of referrals from two groups: first, roughly 25,000 refugees were identified during the UNHCR-GON census with special needs or vulnerabilities, such as torture victims, single women heads-of-household, or under age 25 heads-of-household; and second, roughly 4,000 refugees had submitted informal applications for U.S. resettlement.

Cochetel and Roberson were reluctant to use those refugees who had submitted applications as they disproportionately represented the well-educated, high-caste segment of the population.

Refugees Support Third-Country Resettlement

¶16. (SBU) On April 24 and 25, Bartlett and Belz met with several Bhutanese refugee leaders and visited two refugee camps (Beldangi 2 and Goldhap) in Jhapa District where they met with the Camp Management Committees and randomly-selected focus groups representing particular demographics in the camps, such as young men, young women, and victims of torture. In all the meetings, refugees asked numerous questions about U.S. resettlement. The refugee community leaders, all of whom had expressed reluctance for resettlement in previous years, welcomed the U.S. resettlement offer. They emphasized the need for refugees to make well-informed decisions and requested more information about the U.S. program. Belz assured them that the U.S. intended to work closely with UNHCR to ensure refugees were well-informed.

Core Group Encouraged By U.S. Resettlement Timeline

¶17. (SBU) On April 26, Bartlett and Belz briefed Core Group Ambassadors from Australia, Denmark, and Norway as well as the local Canadian Cooperation Officer on U.S. resettlement plans. The group responded positively. Australian Ambassador, and local Core Group Chairman, Graeme Lade

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indicated that Canberra would decide on its 2007 refugee quota in May and could begin its process as early as July. The Canadian representative Ed Doe was not certain when Ottawa would be ready to announce resettlement numbers and agreed to revert to his capital on this issue. Norwegian Ambassador Tore Toreng noted that his government had extended the deadline for processing a number of vulnerable Bhutanese refugees that were waiting for GON exit permission.

Extensive Media Coverage on U.S. Resettlement Program

¶18. (SBU) Bartlett and Belz held a press conference April 26 with print and broadcast journalists representing both English and vernacular media. The PRM team distributed the U.S. fact sheet on resettlement at the briefing. Newspaper articles published the following day highlighted the U.S. commitment to allow all interested refugees to apply for U.S. resettlement, no matter whether that number exceeded 60,000. The media coverage was positive and demonstrated the popular appeal of U.S. resettlement.

Comment: Next Steps

¶19. (SBU) PRM's visit to Nepal went far to solidify GON and refugee support for third-country resettlement. The positive response to U.S. resettlement was overwhelming and nearly universal. However, some challenges remain. An effective information campaign on resettlement will be critical in preventing pro-repatriation groups in the camps from gaining momentum. Much work remains to be done in streamlining the GON exit permission process, which now requires months to complete. Post will use the small group of vulnerable Bhutanese refugees, who will undergo pre-screening April 15 - 16, as a test case for a revamped exit permit process.

HUGINS